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# **THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE? GURUS, MANAGEMENT IDEAS AND CONSUMER VARIABILITY**

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Timothy Clark is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Durham Business School, Durham University. In the last decade he has conducted a series of research projects into consultancy work and speaker–audience interaction during management guru lectures. The publications emanating from these projects include *Management Speak* (with David Greatbatch, Routledge 2005), *Management Consultancy: Knowledge and Boundaries in Action* (with Andrew Sturdy, Robin Fincham, and Karen Handley, Oxford 2008) and, most recently, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Consulting* (with Matthias Kipping). He is currently working on a multidisciplinary project examining the emergence and nature of ‘Tipping Points’ funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

# **THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE? GURUS, MANAGEMENT IDEAS AND CONSUMER VARIABILITY**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study draws on an active audience perspective to develop a better understanding of mass audiences' attraction towards popular management ideas. We focus on audience members' own experiences and in particular *what* audience activities actually play a role in shaping mass attraction, and *how* the deployment of these activities may vary.

Analyzing 65 in-depth interviews with management practitioners in their role as audience members of guru seminars, we identify different key consumption activities, and explain how individual management practitioners may shift in consumption orientation throughout the communication process. This paper argues that such a broader and more dynamic understanding of consumption activity is essential in understanding the success and impact of management ideas and opens several fruitful research directions.

Keywords: active audience, consumption, guru audiences, management gurus, management ideas

## INTRODUCTION

In explaining the dissemination and widespread attraction of particular management ideas amongst a mass audience of managers, prior studies have stressed the important role of managers' psychological needs, the resonance of these ideas with the zeitgeist, and the agency of various management knowledge producers in creating and communicating these ideas to the managerial masses (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Clark and Salaman, 1996; 1998; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Sturdy, 2004). Researchers have particularly stressed the significance of knowledge producers' ability to shape these ideas in ways that appeal to an audience that is conceived of as a homogenous mass whose favorable responses to certain ideas are driven by generic impulses. Consequently, we still know little about the ways in which an audience may be differentiated and how these differences impact on whether they find an idea attractive.

Yet, this generic view of 'the' managerial audience as a reactive body that collectively adopts ideas to satiate certain cravings is at variance with the viewpoint in the literature on organizational implementation. Here organizational members are portrayed as active agents in the 'consumption' of different popular management ideas (e.g. Ansari et al., 2010; Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud, 2011; Mueller and Whittle, 2011; Røvik, 2011; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013; Zbaracki, 1998)<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, a growing stream of research stresses that, within the specific context of organizational implementation, organizational members' responses to these ideas are: 'riddled with ambiguity and range from open resistance to manipulation to internalization' (Kelemen, 2000, p. 483; see also Boiral, 2003; Kostova and Roth, 2002; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010;

Sturdy, 1998; Watson, 1994). Similarly, in the context of MBA programs, studies have revealed how students' attitudes towards management ideas are characterized by ambivalence and emphasize the significance of identity processes in relation to the acquisition of ideas (Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000; Sturdy et al., 2006).

Given the generic approach to conceptualizations of mass audiences in prior research on the promotion and popularity of different management ideas and its contrast to the more differentiated notions in the literature on other contexts such as organizational implementation and MBA programs, there is a need to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of audience members' responses to ideas as they are promoted in mass communication settings. A lack of attention to the complexities of managerial audiences may not only limit the development of an improved understanding of the possible impact of different management knowledge producers and their ideas (Sturdy, 2011), but also limits the advancement of a more enhanced conceptualization of 'the' management idea consumer who is considered a critical yet 'poorly understood component' in the research on management ideas (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001, p. 939; see also Clark, 2004; Heusinkveld et al., 2011; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013).

To address this lacuna, we draw on an active audience perspective from the field of communication research (Biocca, 1988; Kim and Rubin, 1997; Levy and Windahl, 1984). In this perspective, scholars have stressed the significance of studying individual members' experiences of audience activities in explaining how and why audience members may respond differently to media messages in mass communication settings. It views mass audiences not as passive or active per se, but as 'variably active' (Godlewski and Perse, 2010, p. 150).

In this paper we ask: *what* audience activities play a role in shaping mass attraction towards management ideas, and *how* does the deployment of these activities vary amongst individual audience members throughout the communication process? To address these broad questions we focus on management guru seminars because, as the most high profile communicators of management ideas, their live lectures constitute an important moment of relatively unmediated and bounded consumption that occurs prior to organizational implementation (Carlone, 2006; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Collins, 2012; Grint and Case, 1998; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). As Greatbatch and Clark (2004) note, these are critical events that ‘create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts’ (p. 1539) and thus build the momentum necessary for an idea to become popular (see Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001).

Analyzing 65 in-depth interviews with management practitioners about their role as audience members of guru seminars, we identify different key audience activities and explain how individual management practitioners may shift in consumption orientation during the communication process. As such, this study makes two main contributions. First, we extend prior work on mass audiences in the dissemination of management ideas by providing a more active and differentiated view of how audience members relate to ideas in mass communication settings. Second, by showing how individual audience members may shift in their consumption orientation during the mass communication process, we add important nuance to extant understandings of consumers’ active agency. In particular, we stress the need for a more dynamic understanding of audience responses that can account for the individual-level shifts in consumption orientations.

The next section outlines how mass audience attraction has been explained in the literature on the dissemination of management ideas. We then introduce the notion of the

‘active audience’ from communication theory. This is followed by the discussion of our research method. The subsequent sections present the research findings relating to the different consumption orientations adopted by individual audience members and how they may shift between these consumption orientations during the communication process. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications and conclude by providing a number of suggestions for future research.

## **MANAGEMENT IDEAS AND MASS AUDIENCE ATTRACTION**

For a potential popular management idea to become the fashionable idea of the moment, during dissemination it needs to reach a threshold at which large numbers of the intended audience begin to consume it in one form or another (i.e., as a management seminar, book and/or change package). The extant literature identifies a number of factors that account for the attraction of these ideas for their intended mass audience.

One explanation for the desirability of popular management ideas relates to the “intra-psychic” tensions and search for control and certainty that are generally associated with enacting the managerial task in a world that appears messy, capricious and unstable (Abrahamson, 1996; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996; Sturdy, 2004). Thus these ideas are viewed as attractive to and build dependence from management practitioners because they help ‘satisfy individuals [managers’] *psychological* needs’ (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 271; see also Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Jackall, 1988). Exemplifying this approach Watson (1994, p. 904) writes, these ideas are attractive because they help managers to ‘create a sense of order in the face of the potential chaos of human existence’.



A second set of explanations has stressed that the attractiveness of certain management ideas is related to the extent to which they frame their analyses of contemporary management problems and solutions so they resonate with and are in harmony with the expectations of their target mass audience. They are unlikely to gain traction with the target audience if they fail to convince them of their plausibility by apprehending the *zeitgeist* or ‘spirit of the times’ (Grint, 1994, p. 193, see also Abrahamson, 1996; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Kieser, 1997). The point is that popular management ideas need to persuasively articulate both how they solve key managerial problems and priorities (e.g. efficiency, performance enhancements, creating effective change) and why they offer the best means to address these at a point in time. This explanation relates to what Wilhelm and Bort (2013, p. 429-430), drawing on March (1994), have termed the ‘logic of consequence’ approach in that managers evaluate the merits of alternative ideas based on ‘the advantageous consequences that are expected to result from their proper implementation’ (p. 429). However, although this particular notion draws on economic approaches to explaining why management ideas may generate a mass appeal (Bikchandani et al., 1998; Bloom and van Reenen, 2007), in line with Grint (1994) the positive benefits of particular ideas in terms of means-ends relationships are likely discursively constructed via the *zeitgeist*.

The final set of explanations focuses on the way in which different producers of management ideas actively shape their products and services so that they are intrinsically attractive to a large group of managers (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Sturdy, 2004; ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2007). For example, one group of studies has focused on best-selling management books and highlighted the importance of a focus on a single factor, short sentences, promises of significant performance improvement, references to well-known

and highly regarded users, examples of successful use, space for individual interpretation, and common editorial practices (Furusten, 1999; Giroux, 2006; Grint, 1994; Kieser, 1997; Lischinsky, 2008; Røvik, 2002). Other studies have examined the importance of rhetorical practices and persuasive strategies deployed by different producers of management knowledge. When deployed effectively they have been shown to enhance the prominence of their messages and increase audience attentiveness thus creating the conditions necessary for a managerial audience to empathize with those communicating the ideas (Cullen, 2009; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005; Jackson, 1996, 2001; Sims et al., 2009).

Whilst the prior literature has significantly advanced our understanding of the factors accounting for the attraction of particular ideas amongst a managerial audience, it suffers from at least two key limitations. First, the portrayal, particularly in the first two explanations reviewed above, of a relatively mechanistic or reactive managerial audience that willingly adopts ideas framed in particular ways to resolve common and apparently pressing problems is at variance with the image of organizational members as *active* idea consumers emanating from research focusing on how managers use ideas in an organizational context (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Heusinkveld et al., 2011; Røvik, 2011; Sturdy, 2004; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). Literature emphasizing the self-determinacy of managerial consumers shows how they strategically use management ideas, and adapt or ‘translate’ them to fit different organizational contexts (e.g. Wilhelm and Bort, 2013; DeCock and Hipkin, 1997; Fiss et al., 2012; Guillén, 1994; Kelemen, 2000; McCabe, 2011). This is in line with the recent study of Wilhelm and Bort (2013, p. 431) who, referring to March (1994), stress the ‘logic of appropriateness’ approach to understanding how managers actively consume and shape ideas according to the rules

and role expectations within the social context in which they act. Building on this literature, there is a need to view managerial audiences during dissemination more as ‘independent and active’ (Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010, p. 881).

Second, and related, during dissemination, audience responses towards management ideas and the actors that produce them are generally represented as relatively static. While acknowledging that mass communication events ‘are not generally comprised of a homogeneous audience’ (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005, p. 133), the research emphasis is primarily on audiences’ favorable responses to the ideas that are communicated (e.g. Cullen, 2009; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003; ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2007). In the setting of MBA programs, ‘intense ambivalence’ towards management ideas is found to be *the* primary response of students (Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000, p. 986; see also Sturdy et al., 2006) as they tend to downplay the importance of particular tools and techniques while stressing the significance of acquiring managerial language as part of their identity work. In parallel, a growing stream of research that focuses on studying the specific context of organizational implementation tends to classify organizational members to relatively stable response categories, including: (1) positive responses (e.g. ‘embracement’, ‘commitment’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘full and true adoption’, ‘outspoken proponent’, and ‘adding to initiatives’), (2) unfavorable or negative responses (e.g. ‘rejection’, ‘resistance’, ‘avoidance’, and ‘detachment’), and (3) various partial, or even contradictory forms conformity (e.g. ‘behavioral compliance’, ‘assent adoption’, ‘lip service’, ‘low-dosage adaptation’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘ceremonial integration’) (terms in parentheses used within the studies of Ansari, 2010; Boiral, 2003; Jackall, 1988; Kelemen, 2000; Kostova and Roth, 2002; McCabe, 2011; McDermott et al., 2012; Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000; Sturdy, 1997, 1998; Watson, 1994). This would suggest that

managers are primarily conceptualized as active, but at the same time seen as relatively static in terms of the response categories they use.

In seeking to address these limitations, we adopt an active audience perspective because it emphasizes the importance of studying audience activities in explaining how and why audience members respond to media messages in mass communication settings.

## **STUDYING AUDIENCES**

Whilst the study of active audience comprises various approaches (Biocca, 1988; Gunter, 1988; Morley, 1993), theorists have persistently shared an interest in explaining media uses and effects by focusing on individual users' own experiences in mass communication processes (Cooper and Tang, 2009; Godlewski and Perse, 2010; Ruggiero, 2000). As Gunter (1988, p. 124) succinctly states: 'these effects must be measured among audience members themselves ... they cannot be inferred through guesswork, no matter how detailed or sophisticated the media content assessment happens to be'. Building on the seminal work of Blumler (1979) and Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), a growing literature developed a conceptualization of audiences as *variably active*, rather than seeing them as active or passive per se. As a result, scholars have stressed the importance of studying how various audience activities relate to the nature of audience experiences and ultimately to media effects (e.g. Kim and Rubin, 1997; Levy and Windahl, 1984). We first discuss the nature of these activities and then outline how individuals may vary in their active agency.

First, active audience theorists suggest that audience activity becomes apparent in audience members 'selectivity', 'involvement' and 'utility' in relation to a mass communication process. Selectivity involves activities associated with the making of

choices about media and media contents for example deciding to watch television and choosing a particular program from a number of alternatives (Blumler, 1979; Davis, 2005; Perse, 1990). Activities of involvement entail the assignment of meaning and related mental and/or emotional states of anticipation with media content such as being fascinated or feeling turned-off by certain media content or characters (Fiske, 1992; McQuail et al., 1972). Utility refers to activities related to the way audience members actually experience use, ignorance and even rejection of particular forms of media and media content (Bauer, 1964; Biocca, 1988). Watching the news, for example, may allow audience members to 'express and perhaps share some set of political or social sentiments' (Levy and Windahl, 1984, p. 56).

Various studies indicate that these activities help explain how and why audience members differ in their orientation towards the media and the specific contents these media convey (Blumler, 1979; Levy and Windahl, 1984; Perse, 1990; Rubin and Perse, 1987). In the words of Levy and Windahl: 'audience activity clearly is best conceptualized as a range of possible orientations to the communication process' (1984, p. 73). They submit that the variety in orientations can primarily be explained by the specific gratifications audience members seek and obtain: 'there is a demonstrable association between their activeness and the uses and gratifications they associate with media exposure' (Levy and Windahl, 1984, p. 74).

Second, the active audience literature suggests that individual audience members' level of activity is not constantly high or low all the time (Godlewski and Perse, 2010; Levy and Windahl, 1984). Rather, it is emphasized that each audience member is likely to be variably active along the communication process (Biocca, 1988; Blumler, 1979; Gunter, 1988; Levy and Windahl, 1984). For instance Cooper and Tang (2009, p. 403)

found that ‘an individual is likely to be (at varying degrees) passive and active at different points, at times actively choosing the medium (or another technology), and at other times choosing the medium because it is accessible or a habit.’ Thus theorists of active audience stress the need to account for the highly dynamic character of the consumption process.

In the context of this research, the active audience literature critically emphasizes that to better understand the attraction of management ideas for an audience of management practitioners, it is essential to conceptualize individual audience members as being *variably active*. Informed by this literature, we concentrate our empirical analysis on exploring different audience activities within management guru seminars, and how individual orientations may vary during the communication process.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

To gain a better understanding of what audience activities play a role in the dissemination and widespread attraction of particular management ideas, and how individual audience members may vary in the way they deploy these activities, we interviewed 65 management practitioners participating in a range of different guru seminars (Table 1). We focus on guru seminars because the gurus’ live presentations that are central to such events are considered critical both to a guru’s popularity and the subsequent impact of their ideas (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005; Huczynski, 1993; Pagel and Westerfelhaus, 1999; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Indeed, these live presentations typically

constitute an important moment of relatively unmediated communication of management ideas to a managerial audience, intended to: ‘facilitate conversion or identification with a new idea’ (Clark and Salaman, 1998, p. 143). This setting therefore permits us to focus on audience responses that are made outside the pressures of organizational implementation.

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INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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Our sampling strategy was two-layered. The first stage involved interviewing 47 audience members at two different guru seminars because we expected that this would enable us to collect a wide range of perceptions and activities from individual management practitioners’ during a single seminar in order to enhance the chances of creating ‘flesh on the bones of general constructs’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 27) (see Table 1, rows A and B). We selected these seminars because Guru A and Guru B are listed amongst the most popular and influential management thinkers in the context of the Netherlands (Haijtema, 2011). In addition, given that gurus may vary in style and message (Huczynski, 1993; Greatbatch and Clark, 2005), the selected seminars differed in terms of key characteristics such as duration, size, location and key topics. Keeping the national context constant ensures comparability of these characteristics. To better understand the specific contexts in which these audience members resided, we drew on additional sources such as interviews with the respective gurus and relevant written material from and about the seminar.

Given the focus on participation in one particular seminar in the first series of interviews, in a second stage we concentrated on selecting a number of informants who

allowed us to learn more about their experiences across a number of different seminars. Therefore we interviewed 6 practitioners about their participation in a seminar series with international gurus in the Netherlands (see third row Table 1, labeled with C), and 12 practitioners about their participation in a broad range of seminars by Dutch and/or international gurus (see last row Table 1, labeled with D). By asking informants to explicitly compare the consumption of various guru seminars, we not only gained a better understanding of the differences reported by participants of Guru A and B, but also gained further insights into relevant audience activities and into the reasons for not attending certain seminars. As with the first series of interviews, to increase our chances of discovering a broad range of relevant concepts, we selected informants who showed variety in terms of their educational background, role and level, gender and organization (see Appendix 1).

We adopted a semi-structured approach (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In line with an active audience perspective, questions focused on why informants selected a seminar, how they got involved in a seminar, and whether and how they made use of a seminar after the respective event. Most of the interviews were held at the informants' offices and, on average, lasted around one hour. All interviews were transcribed and sent back to the informants for comments.

### **Data analysis**

In a first round of analysis we focused on identifying different consumption activities, using Levy and Windahl's (1984) categorization as 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006) to guide our research process without predefining the outcome of it. We therefore identified text fragments in the interview transcripts referring to consumers'



selectivity, involvement and utility activities. These fragments included a broad range of activity types, such as physical, emotional and mental activities. Involvement in the context of guru seminar consumption, for example, can be associated with making notes during a seminar (physical activity), getting enthusiastic about an idea (emotional activity) or transferring an idea to one's own context (mental activity). In common line with how 'activity' is understood in the active audience literature, many of the activities reported by our informants were not physical ones, such as filling in a registration form for a seminar, but are 'cognitive judgments' (Gunter, 1988, p. 113; see also Perse, 1990), such as evaluating the performance of a guru or thinking about the potential uses and gratifications of attending a seminar.

In a second phase, we explored the possible relationships between and among the three activities (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). By going repeatedly through the data, we searched for structures and core themes underlying the three consumption activities (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Emerging themes included content-driven and non-content driven consumption activities, positive and negative consumption experiences, and differing levels of activity, for example a low or high level of selectivity, involvement and utility. By continuously comparing these emerging themes with the active audience literature (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we reflected on our findings in the guru seminar context and grouped our core findings along two dimensions which we labeled 'consumption orientations' and 'shifts of consumption'. In line with the active audience literature, 'consumption orientation' refers to the gratifications consumers seek when consuming media (Levy and Windahl, 1984; Rubin and Perse, 1987). With 'shifts of consumption' we followed the active audience literature in its

conception that a single consumer may not necessarily be stable in how and why s/he consumes particular media (Blumler, 1979; Levy and Windahl, 1984).

In a third step of analysis, we went back to our data and further verified and specified them by two authors categorizing the interview data independently of each other, and subsequently discussing and agreeing on categories and the boundaries between them. After several rounds of refinement, we settled upon the following categories: (1) twelve different understandings of selectivity, involvement and utility activities, to account for the various ways in which management practitioners consume guru seminars, (2) four distinct consumption orientations, explicating the underlying gratifications consumers seek in their consumption, and (3) three shifts of consumption, referring to how single consumers may change in orientations during their consumption process. Our final categories are presented in Tables 2 to 5 in the Findings section.

## **FINDINGS**

In the sections that follow we will first discuss how the underlying orientations of individual audience members' consumption activities may vary significantly by giving a brief sense of their nature (see Table 2). Moreover, the analysis revealed that the orientations of individual management practitioners as audience members do not necessarily remain stable throughout the consumption process. These 'shifts' will be briefly discussed afterwards (Table 3-5).

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE  
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### **Consumption orientation 1: Devoted consumption**

The first consumption orientation that emerged from our data involved ‘devoted consumption’. Here, consumption activities are primarily oriented towards gaining knowledge to address work-related problems.

*Selectivity.* Within this orientation, management practitioners framed selection activities in terms of learning specific solutions from the available stock of management knowledge. Informants’ selection was driven by specific issues at work, such as a re-organization, or the need to better cope with new position or tasks. For instance, Informant B11, responsible for a change management project, was searching the world-wide-web for information on this issue. After coming across a YouTube video of Guru B, he read Guru B’s book and decided to attend a one-day seminar because:

‘in my perception, new ways of working are mainly related to the question of how you can work more efficiently. And this fits with Guru B.’

*Involvement.* The analysis revealed that, viewed from a devoted orientation, consumption activities are related to displaying a high degree of involvement. Informants associate involvement with activities such as taking notes, exchanging thoughts with other participants about the messages and, if possible in the respective seminar setting, asking questions to the guru about their own work-related problems. A manager in the public sector, for example, described her consumption behavior as follows: ‘I always write down a lot so that I can remember things better.’ (A4). A director of a local school, who already had attended this seminar twice, reported a high level of emotional involvement such as feeling relief when listening to the message again:

‘This was thus a real eye-opener. While [Guru B] was talking about this [concept], I thought that this, at one go, provides a way out of our misery.’ (B5)

*Utility.* In a devoted orientation, utility activities are oriented towards actively and purposefully making use of the knowledge gained leading to direct implications for one’s work. Our informants related utility to reading back their notes, exchanging ideas with colleagues, recommending the seminar to others and making efforts to implement the solutions provided during a seminar. Informant C2, a benchmarking specialist of an industry association in the automobile sector, for instance, attended a seminar about the Balance Scorecard. During the break he also received advice from the guru who told him in person ‘Why don’t you do it like that?’ He indicated that, based on this, he became actively involved in reformulating the Balance Scorecard used by his industry association, potentially affecting how member companies in the Dutch automotive sector use the Balance Scorecard.

## **Consumption orientation 2: Engaged consumption**

The second orientation that emerged from the data involved ‘engaged consumption’. This refers to consumption activities as mainly oriented towards broadening one’s own horizon as a management practitioner.

*Selectivity.* Viewed from an engaged orientation, activities of selection are primarily associated with a habitual consumption of guru products and services. In contrast to the first orientation of consumption, the scope of selectivity is more oriented towards following current developments in the management knowledge market in general rather than a commitment to specific ideas. A manager from a large financial company, for

example, emphasized that regular attendance of guru seminars provided him with continuous input for reflecting on his work. He explained how his selection activities implied following the developments of several gurus over a longer period of time:

‘It makes sense to check their [gurus’] development and to see what they are busy with and what their current models are. I know quite some of these models from five or ten years ago.’ (C6)

*Involvement.* Similar to the devoted orientation, management practitioners associated an engaged orientation with a high level of cognitive involvement. Our informants noted that in addition to physical activities such as making notes and talking with other participants about work-related topics, most activities were directed at getting mentally involved with ideas that are regarded as potentially useful for one’s own work. An owner of a small consulting company explained his active way of listening during a seminar:

‘I listened to guru [A] in two different ways. First, thinking what can I use for my new job; and I paid particular attention to the examples he used. Second, thinking which ideas I currently apply. Mainly at the end of the [seminar], I was able to link what was said with the way I work.’ (A3).

*Utility.* From the viewpoint of engaged consumption, utility is linked with consumers’ perception of knowledge producers as enriching practitioners’ general knowledge and offering material to enhance their ‘toolbox’. Central to these utility activities is that the ‘tools’ provided are not expected to deliver an immediate solution to a specific problem. Informant D6, who had worked for the tax authorities for 26 years, framed the utility of guru seminars in the following way:

‘What I’ve found out more and more is to rely on myself. ... Seminars or management gurus have a certain influence on me but it’s not that I return from a

seminar thinking: “Yeah, tomorrow I really need to work like that!” Rather, I pick up things and these will probably be processed over time, but the most important is that after a seminar I better recognize the things that I do.’

### **Consumption orientation 3: Non-committal consumption**

The third orientation of consumption is ‘non-committal’. This refers to activities that are typically associated with a more pleasure-seeking orientation towards knowledge producers and the ideas they promote.

*Selectivity.* Instead of selecting ideas on the basis of more instrumental motivations, selection activities in the non-committal orientation are linked with consumers’ wish to be entertained and/or to socialize with colleagues. For instance, one informant described the motivation underlying his selection activities related to a guru seminar as follows:

‘My colleague had heard from a friend that the seminar is fantastic; so I thought: “let’s go, too, and make a nice day out of it”.’ (A1)

*Involvement.* Our analysis revealed that in relation to non-committal consumption the level of involvement is considered lower on content and more oriented towards pleasure-seeking activities such as enjoying the performance and design of the venue, taking delight in the good food served, and having pleasant conversations during the breaks. The manager just quoted, for example, described how he enjoyed being entertained instead of getting involved in content-related discussions:

‘You’re kept busy from the beginning till the end ... [by activities] such as making paper airplanes. The only boring moment was when [Guru A] went into depth ... [into] an academic discussion about things he had said beforehand.’ (A1)

*Utility.* A non-committal orientation is associated with a relatively low level of utility. Instead of actively transferring ideas from the seminar to their own work, informants reported how they had forgotten what had been communicated during a seminar, even if the ideas were considered inspiring. The main value of consumption is primarily associated with the activities related to immediate pleasure-seeking rather than with more long-term utility activities as the following quotation from Informant B8, a manager from a large animal health company, illustrates:

‘I like [Guru] a lot, great guy ... a little cynical, giving things a humoristic twist ... I didn’t talk [with colleagues] about the seminar content, I only told others that is was really interesting, that they had missed something ... Actually, I remember quite little [of the content].’

#### **Consumption orientation 4: Critical consumption**

The fourth orientation of consumption emerging from our data involved critical consumption. This orientation is primarily associated with activities that contribute to expressing consumers’ dissatisfaction towards certain knowledge producers and the ideas they communicate.

*Selectivity.* In relation to a critical consumption orientation, informants frame selection activities in terms of rejecting certain knowledge producers and their products. A director of a local school, for example, who displayed a devoted orientation towards Guru B, explained his reasoning for not selecting a seminar of another Dutch guru:

‘If you claim that people can substitute [a whole study] with a one week seminar, in my eyes you’re a kind of charlatan. ... I don’t esteem [Guru] very much.’ (B5)

*Involvement.* Seen from a critical orientation of consumption, involvement refers to activities expressing consumers' frustration with the knowledge producer, the content of their ideas or the way these ideas are communicated. Our informants linked involvement with not listening carefully, directing their attention to side-activities such as checking their mobile or chatting with neighbors, getting annoyed and irritated during the seminar and even leaving the seminar before its official end. For example, Informant B1, an entrepreneur who appreciated the seminar of Guru B, described how he experienced a different guru, a famous Dutch sport and business coach, as patronizing. Involvement in his case meant that he experienced strong negative feelings:

‘Well, while this guy was giving his presentation, I really got an allergic reaction by the way he presented his ideas and the level of assertiveness he displayed. He’s the kind of person who says: “That’s how it is because I say it.” Sorry, not with me!’

*Utility.* In relation to a critical orientation, utility activities are primarily oriented towards rejecting the use of ideas in informants' work. Our informants linked utility to remembering the seminar as something that was not worth attending or advising colleagues and friends against attending a particular guru seminar. Informant A7, for example, who received the seminar as a birthday present from his father, talked to others about the low utility of the seminar in relation to its price:

‘I received it as a present but I think it is far too expensive. I also said the price should be at least halved. ... I’d advise people to watch a summary of such a day on YouTube. ... I’d never pay a 1.000 Euro for such a seminar myself.’ (A7)

## **SHIFTS OF CONSUMPTION**



In line with an active audience perspective, our data indicated that individual audience members' orientations are not necessarily stable. Rather, their orientations may display shifts and changes in relation to a particular idea and the person who promotes it. We found such shifts in 50% of our informants that attended guru seminar A and in 32% of the informants that attended seminar B. In addition to the possibility of 'no shifts' in orientation, the analysis revealed three alternative forms of shift throughout consumption activities: 'involvement-induced', 'utility-induced' and 'alternating'. These shifts illustrate and add support to the significance of developing a conceptualization of audiences as *variably active* to better understand the possible attraction towards management ideas.

### **Shift 1: Involvement-induced**

The first type of consumption shift that emerged from our data refers to the possibility that involvement activities are not consistent with activities associated with selectivity. The main trigger for this shift is typically that the fulfillment sought by consumers differs from that they have obtained from a knowledge producer (see Table 3).

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INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE  
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We found this type of shift in a number of informants (A13, A17, A22, C5). The account of Informant A15, a manager at a large Dutch telecommunication company, exemplifies this shift.

*Selectivity.* Informant's A15 selectivity orientation could primarily be characterized as non-committal, related to the wish to socialize with someone from his team. He explained this as follows:

‘[My colleague asked] “[Name informant] do you join? I think it’ll be interesting.” And he didn’t know all these management concepts and it’s someone from my group. Thus I thought it’s nice to join.’

*Involvement.* Although the gratifications he sought by attending the seminar were not particularly high, what he obtained during the seminar was even less. Instead of engaging with the seminar in line with his non-committal orientation, he became involved in a negative way mainly because of the presentation style of the guru. Triggered by his dissatisfaction, his consumption orientation shifted from non-committal to critical:

‘I didn’t expect to learn a lot of new things’, he reported, ‘but I had expected some more depth. For me ... it was just like a seagull flying in, shitting everything all over, and then flying out again.’

*Utility.* Concerning utility, Informant A15 denied transferring or using any of the ideas presented at the seminar and even advised others against the seminar:

‘I discussed [the seminar] in the management team. And I told them: “We shouldn’t do that [again]. ... It has no added value”.’

## **Shift 2: Utility-induced**

A ‘utility-induced’ shift occurs when a consumer’s utility orientation diverges from the main orientation that characterizes his or her selectivity and involvement activities.

Triggers for this shift include a lack of perceived applicability of ideas in practice, a

changed need to adapt one's management practice or factors that may facilitate or inhibit deployment of ideas in practitioners' daily work (see Table 4).

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INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE  
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Amongst a number of informants (e.g., A12, D1, D3), we found this type of shift in the description of Informant C3, a manager in a petrochemical company. He reported a utility-induced shift from an engaged to a devoted consumption orientation.

*Selectivity.* Informant C3 framed his selectivity of a seminar series in terms of his general interest in knowledge:

‘In my normal work as a manager, I’m [continuously] searching ways how to structure things.’

*Involvement.* In line with this form of engaged consumption, he reported a high level of involvement during the seminar by referring to making notes and actively relating the ideas that were presented to his own daily work. Additionally, he took the opportunity to contact one of the co-presenters, a Dutch top-manager who became famous for successfully managing a major turn-around in one of the biggest companies of the country. This resulted in a one-hour talk during the lunch break.

*Utility.* Concerning utility, the informant was triggered to shift to a devoted consumption orientation by emphasizing how he sought to address a persistent problem driven by and using the ideas communicated by the co-presenter. Informant C3 described this as follows:

‘During that time we had a lot of problems with [a] contractor ... and oddly enough the talk with [top manager name] inspired me to change everything ... I

made a whole strategy then to go to the top of the [contractor] company ... and to tell them: “I’m not happy with your performance; it’s either up or out.” It was absolutely the talk with [top manager]. ... This was very valuable for me. ... We’re still busy with this new strategy.’

### **Shift 3: Alternating**

The third type of shift that emerged from our data is ‘alternating’, referring to a continuous shift in consumers’ orientations during a single seminar (see Table 5).

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INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE  
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We found examples of this type of shift in various instances (e.g., A5, A11, A20, A26, B1 and D10). For example in the interview of Informant A5, who worked as a talent program manager for a large Dutch bank, instances of non-committal, critical and engaged orientations towards the seminar of Guru A can be found. *Selectivity*. For selectivity, Informant A5 reported elements of a non-committal as well as an engaged orientation. Her non-committal stance became visible in her report on how her registration had been mainly triggered by an email invitation from the seminar organizer that included a present for personal use:

‘I had heard all the advertisement before and I had doubts about whether to register or not. [The personal email invitation included] a nice offer with a discount coupon [from an internet store], which I found really attractive. That was the trigger to subscribe.’

Additionally, the seminar took place in walking distance from her work place, ‘just around the corner’, making attendance easy. This non-committal orientation did not remain static but alternated with indications of an engaged orientation as Informant A5 also characterized Guru A’s concept ‘as really interesting’ and the seminar ‘as a refresher’ for her own knowledge.

*Involvement.* Concerning involvement activities, Informant A5 alternated between three orientations. She reported a non-committal stance towards what was communicated, for example by perceiving the content as:

‘pretty superficial. I mean, it is a kind of party, it’s nice, but it’s not like: “wow, now I go home purified”. ... I haven’t heard anything new, let’s put it that way.’

At the same time, she showed signs of an engaged orientation by reporting how she felt strongly involved with the content:

‘I was really impressed by his way of presenting; you’re really sitting there and making notes, thinking “wow, I recognize these [ideas]”.’ (Informant A5)

Although she liked the presentation style in general, the seminar also led to a critical orientation. She experienced some parts of the seminar as ‘too dazzling’ and the dance show at the end as ‘completely dull’ and ‘absolutely terrible’.

*Utility.* Informant A5 also alternated between different orientations in relation to the way ideas are put to use. In general, she denied being involved in follow-up activities. Her non-committal orientation was associated with not subsequently listening to the summaries of the seminar on CD, not reading back her notes and also not talking with others about the one-liners that seemed inspiring to her during the seminar itself. At the same time, when asked about the impact of the seminar on her work, she revealed an

engaged orientation in respect to one aspect that she suggested to her manager be incorporated into their own in-house training workshops:

‘[Guru] makes a very nice link between various books and times during which books have been written; and this is something we can really do better in our own program. ... That’s how I used the content of the seminar.’

Taken together, our data suggest that in some cases of guru seminar consumption, audience members alternate between different consumption activities and orientations, underlining the dynamic character of consumption.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Drawing on an active audience perspective, we have argued in this paper that to better understand the dissemination and widespread attraction of particular management ideas amongst a mass audience of managers we need to study individual members’ experiences of audience activities in mass communication settings. Accordingly, in our analysis we focused on *what* audience activities play a role in shaping mass attraction towards management ideas, and *how* the deployment of these activities vary amongst individual audience members during the communication process. We now consider a number of general findings and their implications for future research in relation to gurus and their audiences as well as the wider literature on management ideas.

### **Implications for understanding gurus and their audiences**

Prior studies of guru-audience interaction (see Greatbatch and Clark, 2003; 2005) have already recognized that levels of affiliation to gurus and their ideas may vary considerably amongst an audience. This has an important impact on the type of audience

affiliation that is sought (i.e., laughter rather than applause). However, this work has not elaborated the specific differences that exist between audience members.

Our study of management practitioners attending guru seminars reveals that audience members can adopt four consumption orientations – ‘devoted’, ‘engaged’, ‘non-committal’, and ‘critical’, i.e. gratification that individual members seek with their activities. Furthermore, during the communication process a substantial number of informants changed their consumption orientation, suggesting considerable volatility in terms of the attachment they had to the gurus and their ideas. In line with an active audience perspective (Kim and Rubin, 1997; Levy and Windahl, 1984), our research reveals three main movements between the orientations termed ‘involvement-induced’, ‘utility-induced’ and ‘alternating’. These movements are primarily confined to those whose selectivity is ‘devoted’, ‘engaged’ or ‘non-committal’.

Thus, the results indicate that some audience members clearly affiliate with the guru and their ideas during the communication process, but not all, and not necessarily on a continuous basis. This adds support to a conceptualization of audience members as more variably active in relation to ideas as they are promoted in mass communication settings. However, although audience members may move from one of these three orientations to a critical one, as well as the other three, those with an initial critical orientation do not appear to change. This would suggest that the guru performance impacts primarily on those with a more instrumental or pleasure-seeking view in relation to selectivity, rather than a devoted or critical perspective. In this way audience members’ orientations are affected differentially thereby further contributing to an unpredictable and volatile setting which the gurus have to manage. Therefore we cannot assume from

the outset that gurus have a ready-made audience that is persistently keen or receptive to hear what they have to say.

Accordingly, to shed further light on the differential attraction of management ideas amongst a mass audience, we suggest that future studies may pay attention to how for instance individual characteristics or wider institutional pressures (e.g. Peters and Heusinkveld, 2010), may play a role in shaping the likelihood of particular consumption orientations. Furthermore, a productive avenue for future research would be to examine how specific elements of gurus' talks and the events themselves impact on changes in consumption orientation. Further research could also take into account how consumption orientations are influenced by the interaction between audience members and members' interaction with speakers. In addition, given our cross-sectional research design we were not able to consider the antecedents that trigger shifts between different orientations. Such an important avenue would require various forms of 'shadowing' in which different audience members are followed during an event (McDonald, 2005). Drawing on these approaches may also further develop our understanding of possible scenarios and path dependences in relation to shifting consumption orientations.

### **Implications for understanding responses towards management ideas**

The way management practitioners may vary in their responses has been central in recent debates on the organizational implementation of these ideas (e.g. Ansari et al., 2010; Boiral, 2003; Kelemen, 2000; Kostova and Roth, 2002; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010), and the impact of MBA programs (e.g. Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000). As we point out earlier, even though some theorists have suggested that management practitioners may display



multiple responses at the same time (e.g. Sturdy, 1998; Watson, 1994), most of these studies tend to classify organizational members to a single response category.

Informed by an active audience perspective (Biocca, 1988; Levy and Windahl, 1984), our findings indicate that individual audience members' responses towards a management idea are not necessarily limited to a single category, and cannot be considered a permanent state. Rather, we found that whilst some informants consistently drew on a single consumption orientation, others displayed important shifts between multiple orientations in relation to a single idea or management guru. The identification of various shifts in individual consumption orientation is of theoretical significance because it indicates the need for a more fluid and variable understanding of management practitioners' responses towards management ideas. At the same time, however, we cannot assume that such variability is likely or even possible in every context. Also the possible focus on pleasure-seeking orientations in the context of guru seminars and identity processes in the setting of an MBA programs (Sturdy et al., 2006) suggest that different dynamics and logics may operate in contexts prior to idea implementation. Compared to a setting of management idea implementation, the specific context of guru seminars is typically outside the constraints and pressures of an organization. Indeed, these events are designed to loosen attendees' organizational attachments and create an "in group" (Greatbatch and Clark, 2003) with the consequence that they may change their views more easily. Following Wilhelm and Bort (2013) who urged researches to account for the 'situational character of managerial rationality when studying the consumption of concepts' (p. 429), we suggest that current conceptualizations need to consider the possible constraints that are expected to limit or enhance alternative responses in contexts prior to or during organizational implementation.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that these (mass) events produce people that display (amongst others) a devoted or engaged orientation. Indeed, these people may not only act as carriers of ideas when they go back from an event to their organization, but may also shape other members' attitudes to particular ideas being implemented in the organization and, may enhance or impede receptivity to ideas when these are 'sold' by consultants (e.g. Sturdy, 1997). However, such a potentially significant area of influence has received scant attention in the present literature on management ideas. For instance Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud (2011, p. 179), amongst others, assume that, prior to implementation, knowledge is disseminated into organizations via a range of knowledge producers such as consultants, business schools, and the media (see also Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002) thereby neglecting the people shaped by the mass communication events as important source. In a similar way, little is known about how MBA students' attitudes towards management ideas may impact processes of organizational implementation (cf. Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000).

Therefore, there is an important need for future research to better bridge the literatures on dissemination and organizational implementation. Such research is of particular significance given the debates concerning the assumption that knowledge producers have not only been successful in gaining widespread attention for their ideas but also in influencing the nature of managerial work (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Clark, 2004; Sturdy, 2011). This requires focusing both on how, before management ideas are introduced into organizations, these ideas are filtered and critically appraised via a primarily volatile audience, but also how this relates to the possible behavioral consequences to management and organizational practice (cf. Gunter, 2000; Pentland and Feldman, 2008). This likely entails the use of ethnographic approaches (e.g. Sturdy et al.,

2009) which encourage following seminar participants over a longer period of time to shed greater light on how interactions with other relevant actors shape idea filtering and agenda setting processes which may ultimately determine the possible impact of guru ideas on management and organizational practice.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Such a view is also present in long-standing debates in marketing research (e.g. Wedel and Kamakurka, 2000; Wind, 1978), and the sociology of consumption (Du Gay, 1996; Gabriel and Lang, 1995) amongst others.

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**Table 1: Overview of seminar participants (n= 65)**

Seminars	Top manager n=15 (♂=10; ♀=5)	Middle manager n=28 (♂=21; ♀=7)	Staff n=13 (♂=9; ♀=4)	Self employed n=9 (♂=6; ♀=3)	Total n=65 (♂=46; ♀=19)
1 <sup>st</sup> stage of data sampling: Exploring audience activities during a single seminar					
Guru seminar A					
Informants	6	13	6	3	28
Additional sources	Director of seminar organization (n=1); Management guru (n=1), seminar flyer, press reports, slides of presentation, notes of observations				
Seminar characteristics	Duration: 8 hours, 995 Euro (excl. VAT) Size: Large (>200 participants) Location: Large theatre Topic(s): Leadership, Management, Organization, Performance, Strategy				
Guru seminar B					
Informants	9	5	3	2	19
Additional sources	Management guru (n=1), seminar flyers, press reports, slides of presentation, respective guru book				
Seminar characteristics	Duration: 3-8 hours, costs up to 995 Euro (excl. VAT) Size: Small 20-60 participants Location: Classroom setting Topic(s): Leadership				
2 <sup>nd</sup> stage of data sampling: Comparing audience activities across seminars					
Seminar series C					
Informants	0	3	2	1	6
Additional sources	Seminar flyers				
Seminar series characteristics	Duration: 8 hours, 1.295 Euro (excl. VAT) Sizes: ~160 participants Locations: Large theatre Topic(s): Change, Leadership, Strategy				
Diverse seminars D					
Informants	0	7	2	3	12
Seminar characteristics	Durations ranging from three hours up to several days , various sizes, settings, and a broad range of topics, such as Innovation, Leadership, Management, Marketing, Organization, Performance, Strategy				

**Table 2: Orientations of consumption: Exemplary evidence**

<b>Orientation of consumption</b>	<b>Selectivity</b>	<b>Involvement</b>	<b>Utility</b>
<i>Devoted</i>	<p>Select to learn</p> <p>'[Guru] gave a workshop of two hours [at our company] and I found it so interesting that I had a look whether he offers more things like that. I saw that he gave a [one day] seminar ... and I signed up for it. ... The topic was about leadership and I've got two groups to lead ... and I wanted to learn his new perspective about how to ... deal better with people as a leader.' (Informant B13)</p>	<p>Memorizing ideas</p> <p>'You're simply captivated from beginning to end. ... I made notes about the things I wanted to remember.' (Informant A 18)</p>	<p>Taking over ideas</p> <p>'He provided a very concrete solution [to my problem].' (Informant B7)</p>
<i>Engaged</i>	<p>Select to be stimulated</p> <p>'The gurus [of a particular seminar series] are not [only] familiar with a single subject but they cover a very broad social-economic field of knowledge. This is why I'm interested in this seminar series as it fits with my long-time interest in broader insights.' (Informant C1)</p>	<p>Transforming ideas</p> <p>'You are the one who has to add value [to guru knowledge]. While listening, you have to evaluate whether something is applicable or not ... It is intensive to make a good transfer [to your own situation].' (Informant A2)</p>	<p>Blending in ideas</p> <p>'I have a broad interest [in management knowledge] ... All [knowledge and insights] are put on a pile and based on that pile I do my work ... I attend [seminars] for getting enriched and this may help [with my work] ... in manifold ways but not straightforwardly.' (Informant D12)</p>
<i>Non-committal</i>	<p>Select to be diverted</p> <p>'[Attending the seminar] includes something like "let's sneak out of the everyday boredom and the daily craziness of a big company".' (Informant C1)</p>	<p>Being entertained</p> <p>'Actually, I also talked quite some time about other things [unrelated to the seminar].' (Informant A14)</p>	<p>Letting ideas go</p> <p>'[T]here were some interesting eye-openers, which I have actually already forgotten ... I can't remember them right now.' (Informant A14)</p>
<i>Critical</i>	<p>Reject to distinguish oneself</p> <p>'Maybe [Guru] has written a too [!] popular book. It's not taken seriously and some people laugh about it. ... It has a semi-academic or maybe non-academic style; it's nice but nothing more. This was a reason for me to not attend a seminar of him. I've read the book and I've heard what others told and I thought I do not go; for me it has nothing to add. (Informant D1)</p>	<p>Disengaging from ideas</p> <p>[Guru] has a clear structure, like: these are the steps. But that's it, nothing else. ... There are far better trainings than his one. ... The level was quite superficial. ... Look, I won't [join a game that includes] walking around with others, wearing a back-pack.' (Informant A10)</p>	<p>Rejecting ideas</p> <p>'Their success [names 3 gurus] is to a large extent based on hot air. ... This damages their messages ... they become unappealing to me.' (Informant D12)</p>



**Table 3: Involvement-induced shift: Patterns and exemplary evidence**

	Selectivity	Involvement	Utility
Devoted	A13		
Engaged	C5	A17	A17
Non-com	A22, A17, A15	A13	A13
Critical		A22, C5, A15	A22, C5, A15
Informant A22	Non-committal ‘I didn’t have any expectations, I remember that. Normally, you’ve got expectations and you read a little upfront, you have a learning objective. ... This wasn’t the case here. For [this seminar] it was more like: “For once in a while, let’s attend such a seminar and let’s see what’s going to happen.” ... Honestly speaking, it was a day off.’	Critical ‘All three of us thought that [Guru] is an awful person. An awful guy. We had the idea that he was drugged up to his eyeballs to get through the day. ... [H]e doesn’t affect you emotionally. I think that’s the essence ... he doesn’t reach your heart at all.’	Critical ‘[D]oes anything remain? No! Nothing remains. ...It’s a waste of money.’
Informant A17	Non-committal ‘I know [Guru]. I’ve got to know him during a get-together ... and I had this personal educational budget at [company]. I still had that money, so I thought: “Let’s go to [Guru]”.’	Engaged ‘He knows how to motivate people.... It was a refresher, a moment of rest to look back. To bring back the various trainings and seminars you’ve obtained [until then]. ... It stimulates you in certain ways; it triggers you to notice certain aspects of yourself and to get into action.’	Engaged ‘Yeah, I’ve got several things out of it. For example: “Are you a leader or follower?” This was an important one for me ... I really changed my way of working ... I needed that trigger to get into action. ... [Among other things], I said good-bye to two people. That’s something where I really thought: “Let’s tackle things now!”’

**Table 4: Utility-induced shift: Patterns and exemplary evidence**

	Selectivity	Involvement	Utility
Devoted	A12	A12	C3
Engaged	C3, D1, D3	C3, D1; D3	A12
Non-com			D1
Critical			D3
Informant D1	Engaged ‘[I went there because Guru] has the reputation of being very flamboyant and inspiring and of having a really good story. I’d been told that several times by colleagues who had been there.’	Engaged ‘[Guru] asked provoking questions ... and by his very inspiring way to ask questions you got detached from your daily routine. ... This was the most important thing to me.’	Non-committal ‘In terms of content not much has remained. Actually, I can’t even remember the title of the seminar.’)
Informant A12	Devoted ‘[I selected the seminar] because I’m really interested in business administration ... and to see what I may use in my daily work.’	Devoted ‘[The seminar] was a feast of recognizing things! ... There were really practical things ... that help you to be sharp in your daily work. Something like: “Wait, if I do it like that, then I’ll become more effective or efficient”.’	Engaged ‘One shouldn’t exaggerate things, you pick some things and you use them. ... But it’s not that you do things in a complete different way. It’s not that you, based on such a one-day seminar, introduce a new way of working.’

**Table 5: Alternating: Patterns and exemplary evidence exemplary evidence**

	Selectivity	Involvement	Utility
Devoted	A20	A20, D10	A20, D10
Engaged	A5, A11, A26, B1, D10*	A5, A11, A26, B1, D10	A5, A26, B1, D10
Non-com	A5, A11, A20, A26	A5, A11, A20, A26	A5
Critical		A5, A11, B1	A11
Informant A26	Engaged & non-committal Engaged: 'I had the expectation to get some distance during the seminar from the daily ... "rat race" so that I had the chance to reflect on various philosophies and approaches without getting distracted.' Non-committal: 'I went [to the seminar] like: "I'll wait and see". I didn't prepare myself.'	Engaged & non-committal Engaged: '[Guru A] is enthralling ... and he can easily play with the crowd. ... I have learned a lot [from the seminar].' Non-committal: 'In some respects it felt like an entertainment show.'	Engaged Engaged: 'I have talked a lot to colleagues about it and I still do so. ... The seminar made me think. ... I became inspired and I picked up some topics. ... I've read several books about [these topics]. ... These [two topics] are the two most important things I've learned and we still use them.'
Informant A11	Engaged & non-committal Engaged: '[I selected the seminar] 'to gain general insights from [Guru] about management; how he puts ideas about management together.' Non-committal: 'Each employee has an educational budget of a 1,000 Euro. Yeah, well, colleagues went there as well.'	Engaged, non-committal & critical Engaged & critical: 'It was very fast and at a certain moment you think 'that's interesting' and you start reflecting about it but then he's already gone on.' Non-committal: 'My perception of the day is very positive, but if you ask whether I attended a training? No, actually not. ... because for a training you expect self-reflection and that you get really involved. ... you're more consuming than actually being active yourself. ... it was simply entertainment.'	Critical Critical: 'I listened to some of his summaries on CD [after the seminar] but I've found them completely void of meaning. ... If you ask whether [the seminar] was useful – ... he touched upon some aspects but I don't think that you get more effective by that. If I wasn't there, was I less effective? For sure I can say that this is not the case.'

\*Informant D10 has attended a broad variety of guru seminars, leading to a devoted, engaged and critical consumption orientation as illustrated in Appendix 1. The pattern of 'alternating', included in this table, refers to a seminar where she displayed a devoted and an engaged orientation only.

## APPENDIX 1: Overview of informants

### Guru seminar A

No	Informant			Organization		Espoused main orientations in respect with guru seminars
	Background	Function	Gender	Sector	Size	
A1	Medicine	MM	Male	Healthcare	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as medium; efficient idea absorption <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; day off; joining colleague
A2	Chemistry	TM	Male	IT	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as reinvigorator of ideas; need to make ideas valuable by yourself <i>Critical:</i> guru as salesman; being palmed off; simplistic ideas
A3	Engineering	SE	Male	MC	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as re-invigorator; some ideas useful to apply
A4	Public mgt.	MM	Female	Government	Med.	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as knowledge master; improves insight; intention to apply and further study
A5	Business	STAFF	Female	Bank	Large	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; well-organized performance; enjoyable experience <i>Engaged:</i> guru has interesting ideas that might be partially useful <i>Critical:</i> superficial one-liners that do not stick; no real learning; too expensive; too much show
A6	IT	SE	Male	IT	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as messenger; ideas insightful and useful framework for marketing
A7	Business	SE	Male	Trade	Small	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; relaxing day off <i>Critical:</i> guru as smart entrepreneur; commercial event; too expensive
A8	Communication	MM	Male	IT	Small	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as showman; day off; recognizable but superficial knowledge
A9	Public mgt.	TM	Male	Government	Med.	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as inspirator; insightful and useful knowledge; intention to apply directly
A10	Business	TM	Female	Bank	Large	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; relaxing day off <i>Critical:</i> guru as fake coach; ideas superficial, not new, not true; seminar too expensive and too much show
A11	IT	STAFF	Female	Telecom	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru offers knowledge <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as storyteller/entertainer; being inspired during seminar without applying ideas afterwards <i>Critical:</i> ideas too superficial; ideas do not change way of working
A12	Shipping, IT	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as knowledge provider; efficient form of learning <i>Engaged:</i> guru as stimulator; offers several tools to select from; transfer of certain elements to own situation

<b>A13</b>	Engineering	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as inspirator; ideas are new; offers eye-openers <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as showman; too large and too much a play; ideas too distanced from daily practice
<b>A14</b>	Engineering	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as well-founded idea provider; eye-openers <i>Non-committal:</i> fascinating, energizing show; day off; insights forgotten
<b>A15</b>	Business	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as impassionate; nice day off; entertaining; joining colleagues <i>Critical:</i> seminar as wasted money; ideas have no added value; too general; lack of depth
<b>A16</b>	Business	STAFF	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as inspirator; ideas are eye-openers; intention to apply ideas
<b>A17</b>	Graphic design	TM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as motivator; refreshment of knowledge; stimulates application of ideas to own situation <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as charismatic presenter; well-organized day off
<b>A18</b>	Business	MM	Female	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as master of knowledge; inspirational and recognizable ideas; intention to apply knowledge
<b>A19</b>	Business	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Critical:</i> guru as superficial speaker; ideas not new, no added value and not applicable; mainly impression management
<b>A20</b>	Economics	STAFF	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as trustworthy master of knowledge; useful ideas already applied and intention to apply more <i>Non-committal:</i> day off paid by company; guru as entertainer; show elements motivating but of little value
<b>A21</b>	Public mgt.	STAFF	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as knowledge provider; ideas are eye-openers; deliberately and consciously applied ideas
<b>A22</b>	Engineering	MM	Male	Telecom	Large	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; high-level entertainment; enjoyable day off <i>Critical:</i> guru as charlatan and untrustworthy; ideas not applicable and no added value; not recommendable
<b>A23</b>	Sports Academy	TM	Female	IT	Small	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as knowledgeable; learning and knowledge motives; direct application
<b>A24</b>	Biotech, Business	MM	Female	Biotech	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as credible motivator; stimulus for further reading
<b>A25</b>	Communication	STAFF	Male	Aid	Med.	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as inspirator and motivator; stimulus for further reading and application
<b>A26</b>	Engineering	MM	Male	Airlines	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> seminars as means to reflect; guru as motivator; enthusiasm and starting point for further reading and application <i>Non-committal:</i> no particular expectations; guru as entertainer

<b>A27</b>	Engineering	MM	Male	Consultancy	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as storyteller; contributes to refreshment of knowledge and development of repertoire; discussion with colleagues; selective application
<b>A28</b>	Education	TM	Male	Consultancy	Med.	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as creator of drive/enthusiasm; inspirator for development of repertoire and symbolic application

#### Guru seminar B

No	Informant		Gender	Organization		Espoused main orientations
	Background	Function		Sector	Size	
<b>B1</b>	Economics	SE	Male	Consultancy	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as stimulator; triggered to make sense of general ideas and contextualize them <i>Critical:</i> guru as showman with oversized ego
<b>B2</b>	Biology	TM	Male	Government	Large	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; ideas not new; enthusiastic stories; enjoyable day off
<b>B3</b>	Business	TM	Female	Healthcare	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as powerful messenger; useful addition to repertoire of ideas; stimulates further learning; need to contextualize
<b>B4</b>	Business	TM	Male	Bank	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as high-level energizer; offers motivation and toolbox which needs to be adapted
<b>B5</b>	Chemistry	TM	Male	Education	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as authority/expert; offers eye-openers and highly relevant ideas; applied in practice <i>Critical:</i> guru as charlatan; hot air
<b>B6</b>	Business	STAFF	Male	Consultancy	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as awareness creator; offers useful ideas as starting point for application <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as an enjoyable speaker; nothing new; entertaining sessions; no adaptation to practices
<b>B7</b>	Accounting	MM	Male	Education	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as master of knowledge; offers insight and useful solutions; intention to apply
<b>B8</b>	Business	MM	Female	Animal Health	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as inspirator; new ideas and eye-openers; food for thought; intention to buy book and apply ideas <i>Non-committal:</i> guru as entertainer; offers humoristic but recognizable stories of daily problems; enjoyable to listen to but no effect on work
<b>B9</b>	English Language	TM	Female	Education	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as awareness maker; enhances enthusiasm for ideas, their relevance and their application
<b>B10</b>	Business	SE	Female	Education	Med.	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as inspirator
<b>B11</b>	IT	MM	Male	Consultancy	Med.	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as highly knowledgeable; offers inspiring ideas and eye-openers; intention to apply <i>Engaged:</i> guru as motivator; ideas useful to incorporate in

						repertoire
<b>B12</b>	Accounting	STAFF	Male	Government	Large	<i>Non-committal</i> : guru as skilful storyteller; ideas not directly applicable and not to follow blindly; enjoyable performance
<b>B13</b>	Finance	MM	Female	Bank	Large	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as inspiring knowledge provider; offers proven ideas; intention to apply <i>Engaged</i> : guru as enthusiast knowledge provider; provides energy and drive to learn and to contextualize <i>Non-committal</i> : guru as skilful speaker; few new ideas; enjoyable performance; too much show
<b>B14</b>	Psychology	TM	Male	Bank	Large	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as independent and respectful authority; offers eye-openers; direct application
<b>B15</b>	Business	STAFF	Female	Bank	Large	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as impassionate speaker; mainly symbolic uses
<b>B16</b>	HRM	TM	Female	Education	Large	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as offering stimulating program, awareness and refreshing ideas; intention to further reading
<b>B17</b>	Psychology	MM	Male	Healthcare	Small	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as authority; address need for knowledge; application and discussion with colleagues
<b>B18</b>	Business	TM	Male	Mechanical engineering	Large	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as expert and management thinker; possibility to learn; direct application by changes in style and organization
<b>B19</b>	Economics	TM	Male	Consultancy	Med.	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as motivating storyteller; seminar as stimulating form of learning; useful addition to repertoire; intention to apply

#### Seminar series C

No	Informant Background	Level	Gender	Organization Sector	Size	Espoused main orientations
<b>C1</b>	Economics	STAFF	Male	Bank	Large	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as renowned motivator; offers inspiration; intention to improve organization <i>Non-committal</i> : day-off; sneaking out of daily routine
<b>C2</b>	Business	STAFF	Male	Automotive	Large	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as specialist in particular area; provides focused knowledge and learning; knowledge adapted <i>Engaged</i> : guru as stimulator; inspiration for self-development and legitimation; intention to selectively re-distribute to others
<b>C3</b>	Business	MM	Male	Chemicals	Large	<i>Devoted</i> : guru as specialist; learning new ideas; application of knowledge <i>Engaged</i> : guru as awareness creator; explicates latent knowledge; inspiration for own work
<b>C4</b>	Business	SE	Male	Consultancy	Small	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as expert; offers inspiration for self-development; intention to apply
<b>C5</b>	Business	MM	Male	Consultancy	Large	<i>Engaged</i> : guru as respected knowledge stimulator; offers status and useful ideas for agenda setting

						<i>Critical:</i> seminar as commercial activity; guru offers stylized pictures and dramatic rhetoric; limited use in Dutch context
<b>C6</b>	Business	MM	Male	Bank	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as renowned inspirator; offers stimulus to assess and complement own ideas and further agenda setting <i>Critical:</i> guru seminar as money-maker; US ideas difficult to apply in Dutch context and low relevance for low-level management

#### Diverse seminars D

No	Informant Background	Level	Gender	Organization Sector	Size	Espoused main orientations
<b>D1</b>	Economics	MM	Male	Education	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as inspirator; offers useful tools and enthusiasm which motivates to use them; seminar visit provides status <i>Non-committal:</i> forgetting input <i>Critical:</i> guru as charlatan; ideas without sound (scientific) basis; lack credibility; too expensive
<b>D2</b>	Chemistry	MM	Male	Utilities	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as experienced knowledge master; immediate fit with daily practice; direct application <i>Engaged:</i> broad interest in ideas; own transfer to context needed <i>Critical:</i> difference between motivating experts and money-makers; sometimes too much show
<b>D3</b>	Hotel mgt.	STAFF	Female	Consultancy	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as charismatic speaker; offers insight and new energy for further study and putting ideas into practice <i>Critical:</i> guru as pop-star; offers nothing new or useful tools; too expensive
<b>D4</b>	Nursing school	MM	Male	Healthcare	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as excellent knowledge provider; enriching ideas/eye-openers; stimulates thinking
<b>D5</b>	Mgt.	MM	Female	Education	Large	<i>Critical:</i> guru as hype creator; ideas are superficial and highly repetitive; no consumption of seminars
<b>D6</b>	Mgt.	MM	Male	Government	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as expert; offers knowledge that needs to be transferred to own situation; contributes to own development <i>Critical:</i> guru as businessman; too expensive simplistic and no added value; little possibilities to transfer to own context
<b>D7</b>	Economics	MM	Male	Cultural industry	Med.	<i>Non-committal:</i> guru as commercial preacher; offers fascinating and entertaining show; popular but weak contents
<b>D8</b>	Mgt.	SE	Female	Consultancy	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as charismatic personality; offers strong stories and awareness; encourages enthusiasm for application
<b>D9</b>	Mgt.	SE	Female	Consultancy	Small	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as likeable personality; offers vision and energy;



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						contributes to creating awareness
<b>D10</b>	Mgt.	MM	Female	Healthcare	Large	<i>Devoted:</i> guru as authority; ideas as sound and established theories; application on continuous basis <i>Engaged:</i> guru as exciting inspirator; offers awareness and food for thought; ideas need to be carefully adopted <i>Critical:</i> guru as non-credible storyteller; ideas lack credibility; no added value, too expensive
<b>D11</b>	Engineering	SE	Male	Education	Small	<i>Critical:</i> guru as pop-star; seminar as money-making; ideas not new, not useful, transient; seminar too much buzz and show
<b>D12</b>	Mgt.	STAFF	Male	Education	Large	<i>Engaged:</i> guru as charismatic speaker; well-founded knowledge that adds to own knowledge; ideas are potentially useful after selecting <i>Critical:</i> guru as commodifier with large ego; knowledge simplistic and hot air

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